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AUTHOR Yungbluth, Stephen C.; Bertino, Sissy
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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study determined the impact electronic mail (e-mail) discussion lists can have on a college classroom. The theoretical concepts explored are "community" and "roles." Community is defined by the boundaries it possesses, the dialogue exchanged, and the people interacting in the community. Roles may be defined by the interactions among people within a given context. The archives of an upper-level interpersonal communication class were analyzed to determine the topics of discussion. Topics of discussion that were found in this community were related to social, work, and technical maintenance issues. Providing students some instruction on how to use the technology before implementing the use of e-mail discussion lists may enhance their experience of communicating and may lower any apprehension they may have in using a new medium. (Contains 20 references and 3 notes. Appendixes present a graphical representation of the categories of talk and a chart of data.) (Author/RS)

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Running Head: COMMUNITY IN ELECTRONIC MAIL DISCUSSION LISTS

Extending the Borders of Community and Learning with Electronic Mail Discussion Lists

Stephen C. Yungbluth, M.A.
Sissy Bertino, M.A.

University of Kentucky

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Abstract

This paper presents several theoretical concepts applied to electronic mail discussion lists. The primary concern of this paper is to determine the impact electronic mail discussion lists can have on a college classroom. The theoretical concepts explored are community and roles. Community is properly defined by the boundaries it possesses, the dialogue exchanged, and the people interacting in the community. The roles may be defined by the interactions among people within a given context. A qualitative analysis of the archives of an upper-level interpersonal communication class was conducted to determine the topics of discussion. Topics of discussion that were found in this community were related to social, work, and technical maintenance issues. Implications for the practice of experiential learning are suggested.

Extending the Borders of Community and Learning with Electronic Mail Discussion Lists

Electronic mail discussion lists are one of the new technologies which are changing the way human beings interact with one another. This technology allows an individual to send a message electronically to one address (the listserv) which will distribute the message to every e-mail address included on the list. Subscription to the list can be either open or closed. A closed list allows the list owner to determine who receives the e-mail sent to the listserv.

A teacher can own a closed list which creates a safe environment for a class to continue to interact outside of the classroom. Members of a class can then read or send messages through the list whenever it is convenient for them to check their electronic mail box. This can be extremely convenient for people who have remote access from their homes via a modem, but many students only have access through campus computer labs.

Traditionally, classrooms had been designed as a learning community where the students listen to a professor teach from a textbook. Today, with computer-mediated communication, the learning community is structured differently. Students have the capability to directly access information in a larger information pool - via the Internet, external discussion lists, WWW, etc. The computer can then send this information from one medium to

another (from the computer to the classroom, for example). Students have the capability to generate questions from lectures and send these comments to any/everyone at anytime of the day, any day of the week. Students who once felt apprehensive about talking during class, now have the opportunity to speak their mind. "They can transform information from one medium to another, and they can create new knowledge as a result of their interactions with teachers and other students" (Menges, 1994, p. 183). Students not only learn by "following" the professor, but also learn along side the professor.

How this new operandi of learning translates to the interaction of these students with their peers and professors is fascinating. Several studies have studied how students are now learning with this medium (Menges, 1994). One method is examining how classroom "borders" have expanded to remote and even exotic places, resulting in an open, learning "community." The results of this new sense of community may enhance learning, in addition to creating a sense of belonging for each student. A student's belonging may be a new way of perceiving their own role within this community - the role will be defined by the greater possibilities to communicate with others.

This paper will analyze the archives of an electronic mail discussion list co-owned by a full professor and a teaching assistant for their upper-level interpersonal communication course. Participation on the list was voluntary. Students were

not graded for their participation on the list, however, some important information was shared only via the list to entice students to at least follow the discussion. There were two occasions when the listserv was used to administer "one point questions" (on one of these occasions the value was doubled and thus worth two points). There was a total of approximately 15 points accumulated over the semester, three of which were administered on the list. The one point questions were worth about half of the students' participation grades which accounted for 10% of the their final grades.

The two instructors shared their intentions for the listserv during informal interviews. They hoped the listserv would provide students an alternative way to participate in class discussion especially for students who are embarrassed to speak in front of a large group of people. The discussion list was also implemented to expose students to the technology and to give them experience with one of the ways communication is changing the interpersonal experience.

This paper presents a qualitative look at the archives compiled for the e-mail discussion list used in this particular class. It is intended to answer the question, "How did students use the electronic mail discussion list?" Another goal of this paper was to see if the electronic mail discussion list would show a sense of community building among the participants in the class. This paper represents one portion of a larger study which

also included survey data from this particular section and a lower-level telecommunications class (Yungbluth & Bertino, 1996).

Classroom Community

> *"Communication relationships are no longer restricted to place, but are distributed through space."*
> *Cathcart and Gumpert, 1990*

There has been extensive work in many areas of social science to define a "community." In the past, community dialogue was limited to face-to-face among people in the same physical space. This dialogue was also perceived as expressing mutual concerns and common culture. Whatever the definitional difficulties, all communities, both real and symbolic, exits and operate within boundaries. Boundaries can serve to demarcate social membership from nonmembership.

Computer-mediated communication can be perceived as a discourse strategy which governs any type of human interaction, as well as defining the linguistic practices that come about from the nature of the media involved. Trying to define the field CMC, which includes electronic mail (e-mail) according to Lawley (1995) is a challenge in itself. One of the difficulties in creating a substantive definition is determining the boundaries of a given system. It seems that the definition may see all CMC media as making up a single field, with individual CMC systems as subfields within that field. Lawley (1995) states,

"(W)hat will ultimately justify the definition of the

field is the consideration of the subsidiary constructs of class, habitus, and capital, which must be consistent with a field. It is in this area that the most tentative mappings must be made, for these concepts must be validated with empirical evidence gathered through observation and interaction" (p. 6).

Escobar (1995) adds that the construction of communicative communities are relevant to define, "(by) the role of computer-mediated communication in establishing links between, giving cohesion to, and creating continuities in the interactional history of group members, side-by-side with telephone conversations, regular mail, and face-to-face interaction" (p. 412). We could perceive the role of e-mail for students as an additional source for researching, expanding knowledge, and also to communicate with others.

Community is not only defined by the boundaries it possesses and the dialogue exchanged, but also by the people interacting in the community. Howard Rheingold (1993) describes how technology can change peoples' lives: 1 - as individual human beings, we have perceptions, thoughts, and personalities that are affected by the ways we use the medium and by the way it uses us; 2 - the level of person-to-person interaction where relationships, friendships and communities happen; and 3 - the possible political changes in our lives, derive from the middle, social level, for politics is communication and physical power, and the

role of communication media among the citizenry is important in the politics of democratic societies. Beebe, Beebe, and Redmond, (1996) also posit that as new technologies develop, they will have a potent effect upon the interactions we have with others. Students may choose to use e-mail to communicate with others for various reasons. One of the reasons may include how the student perceives the formality of the communication on e-mail. According to considerable research, CMC interactions are impersonal compared to face-to-face (FtF) communication. Walther and Tidwell (1996) contend that the most common theoretical argument for this rationale is that e-mail removes nonverbal codes which are present in FtF conversations. Without these codes, the affect or the perception of the communication relayed by the other participants may be misinterpreted.

CMC is identified by four criteria as a means of assessing richness of a communication channel: *feedback, multiple cues, language variety, and personal focus* (Trevino, Daft, & Lengel, 1990). The richest medium is FtF while the leanest media are fliers/bulletins. Out of eight media, the third "richest" medium is considered electronic mail. Although e-mail provides almost simultaneous feedback, its ability to deliver meaning through multiple cues, verbally and nonverbally is low. It also suggest that this medium may not be able to transmit/express emotions and feelings. An approach that draws on this notion is the *cues-*

filtered out perspective (Culnan & Markus, 1987). According to the cues-filtered perspective CMC is impersonal. "CMC, because of its lack of audio or video cues, will be perceived as impersonal and lacking in normative reinforcement, so there will be less socioemotional content exchanged" (Rice & Love, 1987, p. 90). Yet, students may decide to use the e-mail as a primary medium to express themselves. Rheingold (1993) states, "Some people - many people - don't do well in spontaneous spoken interaction, but turn out to have valuable contributions to make in a conversation in which they have time to think about what to say" (p. 297). A professor may perceive a student as passive because of the minimal use of FtF interaction. An active student would be perceived as one who uses both FtF interaction and the use of the electronic mail discussion list regularly. This would imply that the student who is active is fully engaged in the discourse.

Classroom Roles

Roles may be an essential component in understanding not only why the student chooses e-mail, but also in understanding the effects e-mail has on classroom dynamics. A way a person defines a role may depend upon their interpretations of a given context. George Kelly (1955) defined role as "an ongoing pattern of behavior that follows from a person's understanding of how others who are associated with him or her in his or her task think" (p. 97). From this interpretation of role, it would

suggest a person does not react from others' expectations of them, yet a role depends on a person's interpretation of the given context. Another definition of role provided by Wofford, Gerloff, and Cummins (1979) attempted to explain the idea of role by characterizing between perceived, expected, and enacted roles, "The perceived role is the set of behaviors that the occupant of the position believes he or she should perform. The expected role is the set of behaviors that others believe he or she should perform. Enacted role is the actual set of performed behaviors" (p. 39). There can be a high level of agreement among these roles, but it occurs seldomly.

Norms and rules also play a significant part in an individual's behavior because they define the role boundaries. Role expectations are an example of how individuals identify what is expected of them in a certain organizational context. Napier and Gershenfeld (1989) state that individuals are more likely to accept the norms of a group's culture if 1 - they want to continue membership in the group; 2 - they feel the group membership is important; 3 - they are in a group that is cohesive, when they and the other members are closely connected, are attracted to each other, and depend on each other to meet needs; 4 - they would be punished by negative reactions or exclusion from the group for violating group norms.

Topical Analysis

Analysis of the topics discussed were divided into three major

categories: social, work, and technical maintenance. The social category was created to contain all discussion which was not directly related to the course. This clearly shows community building since this type of discussion can take place in almost any forum outside of the classroom. Interaction such as this might not take place between the members of a particular class if they did not have this tool. The work category contains all discussion pertaining to the content of the class. Even when the discussion was categorized as work, the argument is made here that community building is still taking place. A greater intellectual community is built when people have the chance to share their ideas in a forum such as this where anyone can participate at any time. The technical maintenance category is employed to accomodate the discussions pertaining to the operation of the listserv. (Please see Appendix A for a graphical presentation of the categories of talk.)

Social

The social category was subdivided into two categories named, "topics" and "rapport." The "topics" category contained references to the various subjects discussed which did not have any apparent relevance to the class. Schegloff (1992) describes how social structures are created through institutional talk. The boundaries of a classroom are constructed in such a manner. Messages which contain reference to social topics are not consistent with institutional talk (Schegloff, 1992) because it

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is not perceived as relevant to the conceptions of the expected role relationships among the members of this community. Therefore, it would be expected that this type of talk is rarely encountered during class. If it were to occur at all, it might be found in the few minutes before or after class. This talk is clearly limited by the amount of time required to deal with the work of the class. The listserv could provide a place where a lot of this type of talk can take place since it is not limited by time and space. However, in practice, only 11% of all the messages sent to the class listserv under investigation contained reference to this type of talk (please see Appendix B for a breakdown of the percentage of messages referencing each topic).

Instances of "rapport" identify some of the clearest illustrations of community building. This category included messages pertaining to well-wishing, teasing, social support, and agreement without elaboration. There were instances of rapport-building in 40% of all messages.

Topics

It is interesting to note that most of the talk pertaining to topics not related to class was initiated by the professor. This may indicate an ideal place for an instructor to display an image other than the perceived and expected role while in the classroom. The first two messages archived were sent by the class professor who was attempting to initiate/model discussion over

this new medium. They were posted only three minutes apart and can therefore be considered part of the same initiation effort.

> Let's here[1] from some folk out there!! Did anyone see the ABC rerun on differences in men and women? what did you think? Peter Stoussel (sp?) was the host. Does it matter that Jerry Garcia is dead? Mickey Mantle? What is the most surprizing thing you've read about comm and culture so far? (slipped one in on you!!) (9A, 6)[2]

> If you want REM tickets you'd best be at Rupp at 8:30AM this saturday. Will the local band's (Too Fat to Skate) first disc be a success? Can Uk's B team in Basketball win the SEC? Why are churches in Lexington spending 91 million dollars over 10 yrs on new buildings when downtown building stand empty and people all over the city are underfed and poorly housed? Inquiringminds want to know? (an old preacher once said..never trust a church with pads on the pews...they've lost their way! what did he mean?) Have I struck a nerve with anyone? (9A, 11)

It is not surprising to see this type of initiation effort on the behalf of the professor since they were the first messages posted. However, it is interesting to see the development of the dialogue which occurred over the listserv following this initiation. This message gives an indication of the type of talk the professor anticipated could occur over the list. These topics received some short-lived attention and then fizzled.

There were only seven responses (3.9% of total) to the inquiry about athletics (including talk of Mickey Mantle and the school basketball program). There were eight responses (4.3% of total) to the music inquiry (REM concert and local bands talk evolved into a discussion of different types of music; no one nibbled at the death of Jerry Garcia). There were seven responses (3.5% of total) to the topic of churches. Only three students imitated the model of initiating topics not related to class. One

student initiated discussion pertaining to development which was connected to the issue of building new churches, but this topic received only one response (0.87% of total). One student raised the topic of racism which also received only one response(0.87% of total). While the third student to initiate a new topic not pertaining to class, raised the issue of politics (specifically, the responsibility of politicians) which did not receive any response. However, the issue was reinitiated twice (2.6% of total). The first time there was one response (feminism); the second time there were two responses (O.J. trial).

It is reasonable to consider that the only discussions which could survive would be those pertaining to the class since this is the only known common denominator among the participants. Most students can probably find other outlets and may prefer to discuss other issues with people outside the realm of their classmates.

Rapport

Well-wishing.

Greetings and salutations are good places to find instances of rapport. Some examples of well-wishing found in the archives include: "Hi folks!" (9B, 88) "welcome aboard" (9B, 101; 9B, 464) "Have a good day!" (9C, 6) "Take care!" (10D, 17). There is a problem with counting greetings and salutations as rapport since the argument could be made that these types of sayings are scripted behaviors. This becomes

especially problematic with the invention of sig.txt (signature) files which are automatically included at the end of all the e-mail messages sent by the person who has created this file. These types of salutations may not be considered sincere since they are "rubber-stamped" onto each message, but this was not a problem in the archives under investigation since there was no remarkable repetition of closings. Also, the argument for the sincerity of the well-wishing holds because not every message contained such a display. Therefore, this behavior was not scripted and was not used as a required social convention.

Teasing.

Friendly teasing is an interesting phenomenon because it can mark inclusion to a group and thus build feelings of rapport among a community, however it can also be destructive to the community when the "teasing" comments hurt its members functionally. Thus, these messages must be interpretted in context, just as the well-wishing messages were, in order to determine their intentions.

Teasing can frequently be followed by qualifiers such as "Just kidding" (9B, 42; 9B, 180; 9B, 375; 9B, 397; 9B, 419; 9D, 147; 10E, 17) to reduce any uncertainty about the interpretation of potentially harmful messages to the community. However, sometimes the sincerity of the "just kidding" remarks becomes questioned when it appears scripted. If the qualifier is

perceived as scripted, then the comments can move from friendly teasing to ambiguously passive agressive strategies. There was an interesting dialogue which took place on the listserv under investigation which included some metacommunication on the intentions of people who tease. This originated from the "CONSTANT BATTLE" (9B, 275) between two members of this particular class. What follows will be a lengthy segment of selected messages from the archives with the text units subdivided into sentence units in order to provide analysis according to speech act theory which conceptualizes the sentence as a particular kind of action (Drew & Heritage, 1992).

a1 I just had a thought, I know that surprises you all!!
a2 What about the "commun- ication script" in our society for heckling or teasing someone.
a3 I just told 18[3] that I never harassed someone I didn't enjoy and respect.
a4 But, like so many other communication phenomena, this is true based on context.
a5 In my group of friends we almost show affection and acceptance by the amount of teasing and cracks we make about each other.
a6 Thoughts... 05 (9B, 472)

b1 a teasing script is a interesting thought...
b2 how do we set the tone/choose the setting...
b3 choose the topics to ensure we communicate "teasing" and not attacking??? (9C, 28)

c1 About the "teasing" conversation script, I guess the tone would be lighthearted and fun, say it with a smile, followed by some affirmation (just kidding, you know I love ya, etc...) at least for me.
c2 The topic can be anything: your mom, your looks, your "significant other", but like the griping, nothing too close to home or too real.
c3 A lot of times it is a repeated joke about something that has happened with the group, it shows inclusion in that if you understand the joke, you're in the group!
c4 I've never thought about teasing this analytically before, it's a stretch!!
c5 See you in the a.m. 05 (9C, 44)

d1 I'm not sure if I know exactly how this teasing conversaion started, but it si definitely interesting.

d2 I had a teacher in high school who believed that when someone teased someone, there was some truth in the teasing.
d3 At first, my whole class disagreed with her.
d4 We insisted that teasing with our friends and family is just in fun.
d5 When, I started to observe situations of teasing, I began to think that she might be partially right.
d6 For example, my whole family teases my Dad because he is always "figuring" for my Mom.
d7 (My Dad's definition of "FIguring" is when he knows what my Mom thinks or wants)
d8 We tease him because he is always wrong.
d9 Yes, Mom is somewhat joking, but it really annoys her.
d10 Friends tease me that I worry too much.
d11 I know that they aren't being mean, but I believe that they mean what they say.
d12 If people do mean what they say, even though they are supposedly joking, does this mean that teasing is a way to express our true feelings?
d13 For example, it is considered "impolite" to tell someone that she has a messy room, but I can "jokingly" tell my friend that her room is messy.
d14 If teasing is used to say how we truly feel, does it work?
d15 This also reminds me of Havermas (I'm not sure if I spelled his name right. SInce 05 read it out loud to me I don't think that I have seen his name spelled out.) because Havermas encouraged us to participate in discourse.
d16 If I understand the term discourse correctly, he wanted us to find out "why" we believe or say what we do.
d17 Could this mean that if Habermas observed someone teasing a friend that he would ask the teaser what he really meant? (9C, 67)

e1 Great idea, 05.
e2 I agree with you about the teasing topic.
e3 Hones.'y, someti mes I want to tell someone something bad about them, but I don't want to be rud e, I will choose -- teasing.
e4 However, I don't do this all the time.
e5 Persona lly, I believe there is truth and "communication goal" in teasing, did I get to serious? (9C, 107)

f1 01: GREAT POINT!!
f2 I think you have a very valid argument about the teasing script!!
f3 I think many times (not every time, but many) we mask what we are truly feeling behind a socially appropriate joke!!
f4 We can't tell someone that they stink at softball (right 13?!), so we tease them about the error they made or the ball they didn't catch!!
f5 Sometimes though, we (or I-- I can't speak for anyone else) don't have any truth, but teasing is a power act.
f6 Who ever gives up or concedes first, loses (right 18?!), and it doesn't matter what you say, just that you say something!

f7 Thanks for sharing that 01, I had not thought about it that way before! 05 (9C, 153)

The first action (a1) taken by the initiator of this thread was to tease herself. This action recognizes and affirms the norm of teasing which has been established in the dialogue prior to this posting. The question for discussion is raised in a2 which initiates the metadiscourse. The intentions of previous teasing are revealed in a3 which support the community building aspect taking place in this dialogue. Theoretical talk, like that found in a4, will not be addressed since this action pertains more to building the intellectual community than it does to establishing rapport. The boundaries of the norm are addressed in a5 which illustrate how external systems have influenced the establishment of the norms in this community. Finally, a6 invites the dialogue to continue.

The professor acted in b to encourage the dialogue on this topic to continue. The response in c offers an explication of the rules for teasing. This response builds coherence in the dialogue because it sequentially follows the inquiries set forth in b. Another instance of well-wishing is found in c5 to close this message by reaffirming the positive intention which was called into question by the substantial amount of teasing which lead to this metadiscourse. All the action in c asserts again that all previous teasing has been done playfully with no harmful intentions.

The action in d1 again maintains coherence in the dialogue and affirms it at the same time by describing it as interesting. Although the word "interesting" is commonly used to equivocate, it is used genuinely here, as evidenced in the context of offering elaboration to continue the dialogue. An alternate position is presented in d2. This position suggests that the intentions of teasing may not be as straightforward as previously claimed. If there is "some truth" in the teasing remarks then it is likely that this is a convention used to express feelings which would otherwise remain unstated. Since this is an opposing position to the one stated in a and c, there is a lot of rapport building going on to encourage mutual exploration and understanding rather than dissent. In fact, d3 and d4 present the reasonableness of the claims in a and c by noting how many people would commonly take this position, even the student posting this message. However, the action taken in d5 suggests a reconsideration of this position, but does so with many qualifiers: "I *began to think* that she *might* be *partially* right." (Italics added to mark qualifiers). This finding is consistent with gender research that suggests that women use more such qualifiers due to a focus on maintaining relationships (Tannen, 1994).

An elaboration on the claim that there is some truth in teasing is found in d11 and d12. This is where the student

finally states her own opinion that people "mean what they say," although she does use qualifiers in d12 by phrasing it in the form of a hypothetical situation ("if") within a question. This position is stated in a way that does not implicate those who tease as being bad people, but rather it frames their attitudes as being accepting of the people they would tease as they are. This position therefore claims that when people want to share undesirable feelings with people they care about, they use the convention of teasing because this allows them to convey their true feelings without making them seem serious which would indicate a need to change.

An invitation is extended once again in d14 for the dialogue to continue. However, prior to concluding, action is advocated for those who may misinterpret the intentions behind teasing. The suggestion to check out assumptions is attributed to Habermas and is once again tagged with a question which causes the student to not appear overly-confident.

There is an interesting problem with coherence in e. This message opens with an affirmation of 05, yet e2 is ambiguous because it states that there is agreement about a topic but not necessarily about a claim. In fact the concluding statement in e5 restates the position put forth by 01 which contradicted 05. This appears to be another example of the primacy of the community since it affirms both members who asserted opposing positions. There is also an apology/confession seen in e3 although it is not

clear if this is specific to the context or if it is an inclusion of the surrounding external environment. An effort is made to stay within the community's boundaries by following the apology/confession with impression management in e4 to remain within the in-group.

To conclude this thread, 05 actually affirms 01's position and then introduces talk about "socially appropriate jokes" in f. This is a curious addition because it claims at the theoretical level that people can not come out and express negative opinions about people's identities and therefore people tease others about their specific blunders. This is curious because it is not clear if this is restating 01's claim or if it is suggesting a different case. At the community level, this appears to provide the context for a direct attack on 13 although it is marked with the question "right?!" which would suggest teasing. A confession is made at f5 which seems to provide a frame for an additional assertion of the rules of the game in f6. In the larger context this message seems to remain consistent with the positive intention as evidenced by the closing statement in f7 coupled with f1 and f2 which affirms the process.

Social support.

Social support was also communicated through the e-mail discussion list. Social support is a good sign of community building due to the feelings of connection that come from giving and receiving assistance. Social support was seen in two forms on

this discussion list. The first came from learning how to use the technology and the other was associated with developing a deeper understanding of the course content.

Part of the goal of using the e-mail discussion list was to give students the experience of using the technology. For about half of the students this may have been their first experience with e-mail. 16 of 31 participants in this study did not indicate that they had used e-mail in previous semesters. However, this does not exclude the possibility of experience with e-mail outside of their university experience. The instructors offered little assistance with how to use the technology and the students therefore had to rely on each other to master it. "relax it isn't hard to print something. Settle down I'll help you" (9B, 267) "I REALLY LIKE THIS E-MAIL THING. ALTHOUGH IT TOOK ME 4 HOURS ON FRIDAY TO FIGURE IT OUT, IT HAS REALLY BEEN A LOT OF FUN." (9B, 275)

Many pleas for help in understanding something from the assigned readings for the course were raised by various content questions. Social support could take the form of "this sounds right" or it could take the form of "I don't understand this either." One example of this type of social support can be found in a response to a perception check, "your interpretation of my comments was right on, you just were more eloquent in how you said it" (9B, 220). The first part of this statement affirms the common understanding that has been discovered. The second half of this statement clearly

demonstrates social support in the comment on the eloquence of the other. Another example demonstrating affirmation is seen in this statement, "i think you hit the nail on the head with you comment about all males instead of those who are guilty. good thought" (9D, 77).

Agreement without elaboration.

There are times when agreement is expressed to affirm an earlier speaker. This is considered a sincere expression of affirmation when there is no elaboration on the point of the earlier speaker. The example used above (9D, 77) illustrates this point well. This is considered significant because many times when agreement is followed by elaboration of the point, the agreement may actually serve as a transition in the dialogue rather than an expression of affirmation which would build rapport (for discussion on maintenance of "threads", please see implications for practice).

Work

In the intellectual community, agreement with elaboration may still be affirming for its members to see the ideas develop. However, it may also be disconfirming when the ideas do not take the course as intended by the initiator. This is why transitions are important to maintain the coherence of the dialogue and will be discussed as an implication for practice below. Transitions are vital to the intellectual community. In the social realm, conversations are perceived as informal and cohesion not

essential. However, in the intellectual community there must be some semblance of continuation of the dialogue because it is perceived as more formal.

Class

Part of the work accomplished through the discussion on the listserv was to come to a better understanding of the class content. The messages categorized as containing references to class often contained pleas for help in grasping something from the assigned readings. Often these pleas were not indicative of a lack of comprehension but rather, raised questions to open discussion on inconclusive topics. An example of this phenomenon is illustrated below.

> IF it is true that men prefer "report" and women prefer "rapport", what do the men think when a woman in our class talks in "rapport" language? 05suggested that women are more likely to relate personal experiences. Since women in our class have related personal experiences in class, what do the men think about this? Some people (Tannen feels mostly men, but I'm not sure) don't value personal experience in a discussion. Does everyone think that personal experience is relevant to our discussions or not? If one person puts faith in statistics and the other person considers personal experience more accurate (gender might not be a factor), can the two people ever engage in discourse as Habermas encouraged? If someone was trying to site statistics to persuade me, and I didn't value statistics, could it work? Habermas wanted us all to have equal access to share out thoughts, doesn't Email provide everyone equal access? 01 P.S. 99 and 98, I haven't forgotten about Habermas even though the midterm is over! (11A, 41)

Exams

It was anticipated that there might be a lot of talk pertaining to exams in class. This might have taken the form of preparation for the exam or coalition-building, "So, what were everyone's gut feelings on the exam? I'm just happy that it is over. :) 18" (10C, 15).

However, only 4.8% of all messages had reference to this type of talk. Discussion on the listserv, as a whole, seemed to always dwindle around exam time. One explanation for this may relate to the time spent in outside preparation for the exam. There is evidence to suggest that the listserv did have a role in preparation for exams through providing a channel to announce the formation of study group meetings.

Announcements

Intellectual community building was evident with the establishment of a study group by this class, "I remember you mention something about study group, if anyone in the class is interested in starting up a study group, please let me know!" (9B, 331). This can not be attributed to the implementation of the e-mail discussion list, however, this medium served as an effective tool to make announcements for meeting times and places for those who indicated an interest in the study group, "Wednesday is great for me! I'm in!" (9E, 24); "I couldn't be there Mon. night either, and I would love to meet Wed. at 7:00, if that's okay!! God knows, I need all the help I can get!" (10B, 53).

Technical Maintenance

There were some technical problems that had to be addressed on the discussion list. For example, many people may not have had experience using a listserv before, even if they have previously used e-mail. Therefore, there were many "test" messages, "This is a

SECOND test to make sure the listserve is up and running" (9A, 6); "It works!" (9B, 403). The listowners were also required to send out warnings to those who had not been checking their e-mail so that their accounts would not be dropped from the list, "warning...don't get dropped important stuff is on the serve at this pt. in the form of good discussion pts. that will work into th exam and more assignments will follow" (11A, 94). This message was followed by a long message listing all of the e-mail accounts of list subscribers who were at risk of being dropped. There is an obvious problem with posting a warning through this medium. Those who are at risk for not checking their e-mail will likely never receive the warning. Also, this warning is probably irrelevant because being dropped from the list will not effect them if they do not read their e-mail anyway. The fact that there was a higher percentage (12.6%) of messages pertaining to technical maintenance than to many of the discussion topics, suggests a real need for those who would use this technology in the future to provide instruction on how to use the listserv.

Implications for Practice

Using an e-mail discussion list can give students an experience of how technology is changing the way human beings communicate. This can be a helpful tool in developing students' learning. It does not offer any miraculous transformations in class dynamics; those who participate in class are likely to be the same people who participate on a discussion listserv.

However, this tool does extend the borders of a classroom community. Students are given an outlet to explore ideas as they prepare for class or to continue discussion beyond the allotted class time.

Most of the talk found in the archives explored here can be classified as institutional talk. The largest percentage of messages dealt with topics pertaining to the class, since this is what all the members of this community had in common. However, there was also a lot of rapport talk which may be unfamiliar to the traditional classroom setting and suggests the potential for enhanced learning since the members of the community work together.

One suggestion for practice would be to provide some instruction for students on how to use the technology before implementing the use of e-mail discussion lists. This instruction may enhance their experience of communicating via this technology and possibly lower any apprehension they may have in using a new medium. Basic instruction can be done either by the course instructor or can usually be supplied through campus computing programs.

Such instruction might include reference to the proper use of subject lines. Transitions become important on e-mail discussion lists because they provide reference to the origin of the new speaker's comments. When agreement is followed by elaboration it provides a continuance of the "thread." Subject lines are supposed to be used to mark threads. In this case

study, there was little attention paid to this function. Most people hit the reply button without regard for the subject line. It is possible inexperienced users of e-mail may only know how to send messages through the use of this feature. Perhaps low e-mail users do not perceive any importance of the subject line in comparison to a heavy e-mail user who has to sort through many messages.

Limitations of Study

This investigation looked at the discussion of an upper-level interpersonal communication class. There were many meta-conversations pertaining to the implications of using the medium of an e-mail discussion list. It would not be likely that other class discussion lists would find this same type of talk, unless the content of the course pertained to these issues as it would in a communication class. Further studies should be conducted to examine how listservs are used in other types of classes. It would be interesting to find differences in classes where the participants are not as aware of the implications of communicating through mediated means. It might also be interesting to create a single listserv for multiple sections of the same course and compare what type of community development takes place in contrast to individual listservs used for each section of a course being taught.

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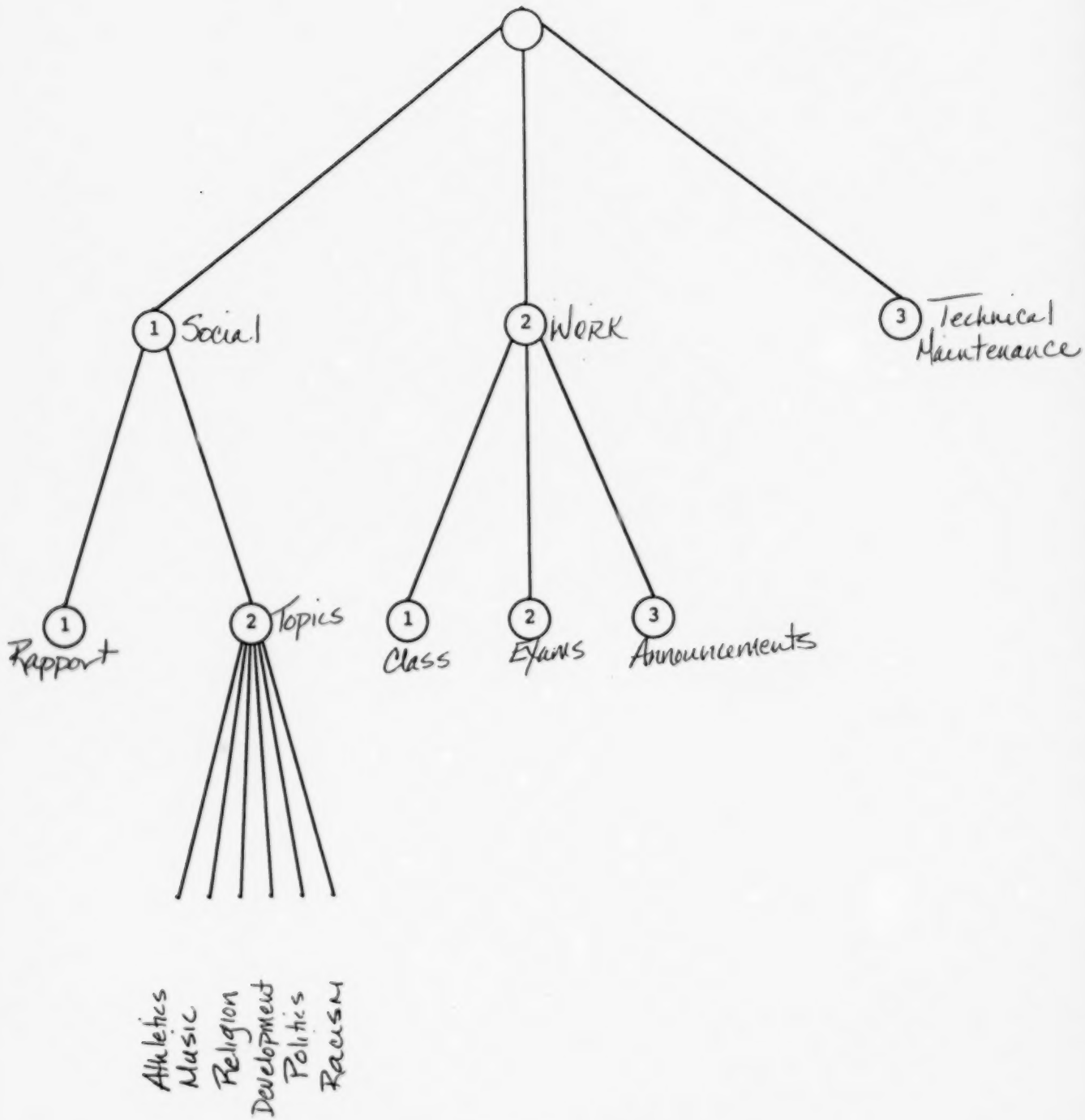
Footnotes

[1]It is common to find many errors in e-mail messages probably due to the fact that this medium is typically used to relay informal messages in a relatively quick fashion. Therefore, we shall not be concerned with using the typical "[sic]" convention to mark where there are errors in the original. This assists in readability and preserves the integrity of the original data.

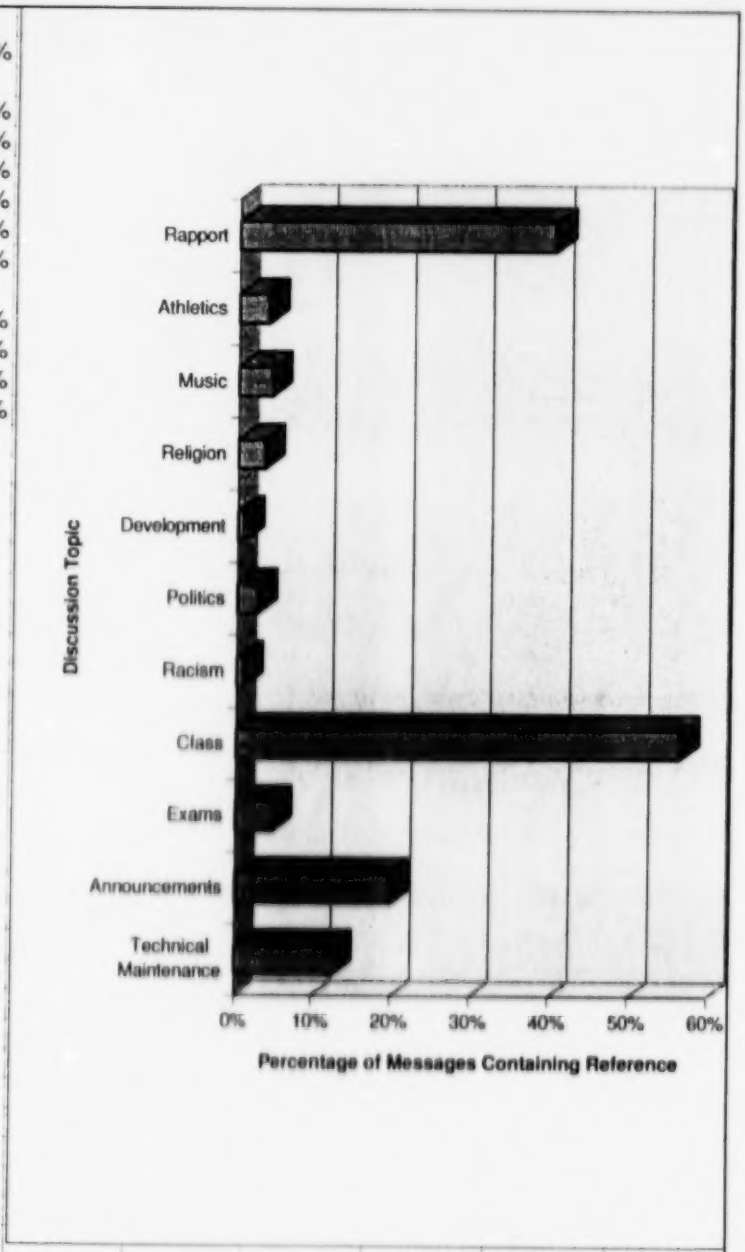
[2]References are made to indexing created on the NUD*IST software. The first reference is to the document in which the data is found. The second reference is to the text unit number within that document.

[3]Numbers are substituted for the names of students as a means of protecting their identities.

Appendix A


1 Social
2 WORK
3 Technical Maintenance
1 Rapport
2 Topics
1 Class
2 Exams
3 Announcements
Athletics
Music
Religion
Development
Politics
Racism

SOCIAL	
Rapport	40%
Topics	
Athletics	4%
Music	4%
Religion	3%
Development	1%
Politics	3%
Racism	1%
WORK	
Class	56%
Exams	5%
Announcements	20%
TECHNICAL MAINTENANCE	13%



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